25 March 1969

MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

Morning Meeting of 25 March 1969 25X1

[redacted]

*Godfrey mentioned that four-power talks may get under way soon and raised the problem of providing computerized support. The Director asked Godfrey to contact John Walsh, Deputy Executive Secretary of the State Department, and make the necessary preliminary arrangements and to note the value of computer runs to the Agency and the Department.

D/ONE reported that [redacted] has completed a memorandum which convincingly argues that Warsaw Pact conventional forces are not superior to those of NATO. The Director noted the impact of this analysis on previous Estimates and agreed to review the memorandum before distribution. 25X1

*DD/S reported a fire last night on the first floor which gutted one room and was caused by a film dryer. Goodwin noted receipt of several telephone calls seeking information on the fire, and the Director asked that such calls be responded to by simply noting the facts. 25X1

[redacted]

Carver noted press items relating President Thieu's willingness to hold private meetings with the NLF.

*Carver reported receipt of a request from Secretary Laird to prepare a memorandum on Soviet reaction to his references to the SS-9 missile. The Director asked the D/ONE to have the memorandum

prepared in that it involves estimating reaction as well as reporting reaction to date.

Carver reported that Ambassador Bunker has met with the JCS and will be seeing the Director at lunch on Thursday.

*Maury reported that yesterday [redacted] briefed the Subcommittee on Bomber Defense chaired by Senator Stennis and that it went very well. The principal concern growing out of the briefing was recognition that there is no reliable intelligence reporting on whether Soviet long-range flights are armed. The Director asked that we keep an informal roster of Agency officers who do particularly well in briefings on the Hill. 25X1

Maury reported that the Senate Foreign Relations Committee has asked for copies of the Director's testimony before the Committee over the past four years.

Maury reported that he has completed preparations to see Senator Mundt on the Senator's interest in a conspiracy in the world student movement.

The Director noted that he will be attending Congressman Rivers' annual luncheon for the Speaker.

ADD/P called attention to a report of President Thieu's continued interest in and intention to become head of the National Alliance for Social Revolution.

*The Director called attention to [redacted] 25X1 reporting North Vietnamese rejection of a Soviet request for a halt in the rocket attacks on South Vietnam. A discussion followed on the available information on indications that the Chinese may have held up arms shipments. [redacted] 25X1 25X1

[redacted]

The Director called attention to the Mankiewicz/Braden article in today's Washington Post as not being helpful. The DD/I called attention to today's Wall Street Journal article on PHOENIX as an additional bit of bad press.

* The Director noted the taped interviews with Dean Rusk on the "Today" show this week and asked Goodwin to get the related tapes.

Goodwin noted that his examination of FBIS material suggests that the Soviets have greatly reduced their attacks on CIA.

[redacted] 25X1

L. K. White

*Extracted and sent to action officer

Frank Mankiewicz and Tom Braden

Self-Interest Hurts Nixon's War 'Intelligence'

IF THERE IS one rule that every intelligence agent follows, it is this: "If the source has an interest at stake, distrust it."

By this rule, most of the intelligence Richard Nixon is now receiving about what is going on in Vietnam is highly suspect.

To illustrate the point, it is only necessary to recall the Bay of Pigs, where the CIA, in its role as operator, influenced itself in its role as fact-finder. Lyndon Johnsos's Cabinet meeting of last July 30 is a more recent case in point.

In retrospect, it can be seen that an incipient revolt against the Johnson war policy was quelled at that meeting—a revolt which might have changed our Vietnam line and—indeed—our history. At least three members of the Johnson Cabinet now say that they went to that meeting prepared to raise questions about the Vietnam policy. At least one of them had already argued the question with the President in private.

But the questions were never raised. President Johnson opened the meeting with the announcement that he had received new, "hard" intelligence. Dean Rusk then revealed it. The enemy, he said, was preparing a massive, Tet-like offensive. It would come very soon, probably about the time of the Democratic convention, then less than a month away.

MR. JOHNSON summed it up. There was nothing to do but hang on. And thus Hubert Humphrey's hopes for electoral victory, as well as a great deal more, went by the wing. The "hard" military intelligence was decisive. And as everybody now knows the "hard" military intelligence was wrong.

There are any number of reasons why it might have been wrong. But among those reasons it is impossible to reject out of hand the possibility that both those who gave it and those who received it desired too much that it be right. President Nixon does not have LBJ's problem of wanting to hear intelligence that buttresses a predetermined course. But the President still has the problem of getting intelligence from those who have an interest in it.

Moreover, there is very little he can do about it. The military arm of the United States is the principal source of intelligence in Vietnam, and the military remains anxious to convince the home front of three propositions: 1) that the war is worth fighting, 2) that we are winning it and 3) that if the military has a little more freedom it can bring it to a quick end.

The President's intelligence dilemma is summed up in the events of this month. South Vietnamese cities have been shelled despite what former Defense Secretary Clark Clifford has called the "nonexplicit understanding" which formed the basis for getting the Paris talks under way.

That "understanding"—since the enemy was not about to make any promises in exchange for an end to the bombing—seems to have been little more than a statement that Hanoi "understood" our desire that there be no major attacks on the large cities of South Vietnam. It must be added that we also "understood" that they gave no assurance that they would in fact refrain from such attacks.

IN FACT, it is not at all clear that Hanoi ordered the attacks on the cities. The NLF may have done so, and at least one source in a position to know says the shells may have been launched by guerrillas who are not under effective control from anybody. As if to illustrate this possibility, President Nixon himself has said a cease-fire is inappropriate in a guerrilla war. Why no more so for "them" than for "us"?

Yet the President is rising to the intelligence bait. His response at last week's press conference—"I will only warn once"—coupled with a continuation of the shelling of the cities is a possible precursor of a resumption of bombing. But such a course, which would blow up the peace talks along with the bridges at Haiphong, will have come about through intelligence received from highly suspect sources: our own military, which is unlikely either to concede error or advise de-escalation, and the Saigon government, which has the strongest stake of all in our continuing the fight.

WALL STREET JOURNAL
25 MAR 1969

The Hidden War

Elite 'Phoenix' Forces Hunt Vietcong Chiefs In an Isolated Village

Raid Prompted by Informers Finds Most of Foe Gone And Natives Tight-Lipped

Demolishing a VC Monument

By PETER R. KANN
Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

DON NHON, South Vietnam—Was it a trap? There was reason for suspicion.

But the risk had to be taken. An unsolicited bit of information offered an opportunity to strike at a local unit of the Vietcong "infrastructure" (VCI), the clandestine political and administrative apparatus through which the enemy lays claim to control much of the Vietnamese countryside.

The affair began like this:

Two ragged Vietnamese, one short and squat, the other tall and thin, recently walked into Don Nhon, a village about 50 miles southwest of Saigon that is the capital of Don Nhon District. The pair told American officials that they wanted to talk about the VCI in their home village of Vinh Hoa, a nearby community of about 2,000 persons nestled deep in Vietcong territory along a Mekong River tributary. A Vietcong-sponsored "Liberation Committee" had been elected to govern Vinh Hoa five months previously, the informers said.

The U.S. advisers were dubious about taking military action on the basis of this intelligence. An ambush might be in the offing. Vinh Hoa was dangerous territory, several miles from the nearest government-controlled village. And the informers said they were refugees, rather than Vietcong defectors, who normally could be expected to be more eager to talk. But the two stuck to their story of overt Vietcong control in their village, and their information checked out with that in allied files.

High Priority

Vinh Hoa clearly was a target for "Operation Phoenix," the high-priority allied effort to root out the VCI across South Vietnam. The year-old Phoenix campaign obviously is related to the Paris negotiations. When peace comes, South Vietnam's claims to control the countryside will be strongest where the VCI cadre are fewest.

The Vietcong claim that about 1,800 governing bodies have been freely elected in "liberated areas" of South Vietnam. The U.S. dismisses most of the committees as fictions existing only on paper and claims VCI cadre are being wiped out at a rate of better than 2,300 a month. Total VCI strength is estimated at about 70,000.

Although conceived largely by CIA men and other American planners, Operation Phoenix is executed primarily by Vietnamese troops. Its methods range from after-dark assassination strikes by small killer squads to battalion-sized cordon and search efforts. A small strike clearly wasn't indicated for Vinh Hoa. The village might be heavily defended. U.S. officials finally settled on a plan for a daylight assault with helicopter transportation. The U.S. 9th Division would provide support.

Hunting the Enemy

Phoenix operations are reputed to be highly sophisticated and productive affairs. The Vinh Hoa effort proved to be neither. It involved intricate—and apparently flawed—planning, largely fruitless interrogation of fearful, tight-lipped villagers, calculated brutality applied to suspected Vietcong, the execution of one suspect, looting of homes by Vietnamese troops, systematic destruction of village installations and a largely unproductive hunt for Vietcong officials who apparently had fled by sampan long before the allies arrived.

The operation highlighted agonizing questions about Phoenix and the allied methods for waging war in Vietnam. Because the Vietcong torture and assassinate, should the allies? Is there value to an operation that "sweeps" a Vietcong area and then departs, leaving no permanent allied presence? Who should be considered Vietcong? Does the VC include a farmer who happens to own ancestral rice land in a Vietcong-controlled village and pays taxes to the enemy?

The counter-infrastructure experts are the Provincial Reconnaissance Units, called "PRUs." Along with the Vietnamese, they include Cambodian and Chinese Nung mercenaries. All are recruited, trained and paid by the CIA. In two days of planning the Vinh Hoa force grew to include about 40 PRUs, about 30 Vietnamese special combat police and a handful of interrogators from the Police Special Branch, Census-Grievance men and psychological warfare cadre. The Americans taking part in the operation were two civilian PRU advisers, two civilian advisers to the special police, two young Army officers working in Don Nhon District and several radio operators. Two companies of the 9th Division, about 110 men, were to form a cordon around the village to prevent Vietcong escapes.

The Last Meeting

Final plans were coordinated at the Tactical Operations Center of Kien Hoa province (which includes Don Nhon) the night before the strike, with more than a dozen Americans and Vietnamese attending or within earshot. The size of the meeting troubled CIA men. They worried, justifiably as it turned out, that confusion and intelligence leaks would follow.

At 7 a.m. the next morning, the operation force is waiting for its helicopter transport at the airfield at Ben Tre, the Kien Hoa provincial capital. And waiting. It turns out that the 9th Division is having difficulty arranging its "air assets." An outpost under siege in a neighboring province has to be aided.

The civilian U.S. advisers begin to get restless and irritable: "The U.S. Army is more trouble than it's worth . . . all their maps and charts and crap . . . goddamned army must have schools that teach delay and confusion . . . never seen a 9th Division operation go off on time. . . ."

One adviser spots a plane to the west circling roughly over the area of the target village. Fluttering from it are thousands of propaganda leaflets. No explosions, . . . Great. Just great. The army is really good at this crap. Pick up a paper and read all about it. Read about the operation that's coming in to get you."

The PRUs and Vietnamese special combat police are wearing a wild variety of jungle fatigues, flak jackets, bush hats, berets, combat boots, tennis shoes and sandals. Some are barefoot. Initially they are sitting in orderly rows along the runway. Soon they begin dispersing about the airfield.

The PRUs invent a game. As a big C130 cargo plane comes in to land, they sit on the runway, then duck their heads as the plane's wings whip past just above them. "They're the toughest men in this war," says one adviser. "They join this outfit because they want action."

The American points to a small Vietnamese half-dozing on the grass. "That man used to be a VC. He got disillusioned with them, so they killed his family. He lit out for the bush. Spent two years out there alone, conducting a private vendetta against Charlie. God knows how many VC he killed. Finally he came in and joined up with the PRUs. He wants to kill more VCs."

Hovering Close

Shortly after 9 a.m., two hours late, 10 helicopters arrive. The Phoenix force piles aboard and is flown for 15 minutes across flat rice land and coconut groves to the landing zone, a rice paddy less than a mile from the center of Vinh Hoa. The helicopters hover close to the ground, and the troops leap out, wading cautiously through thigh-deep mud and water toward a treeline from which they expect enemy fire.

There is no firing. At the treeline the troops are joined by the Don Nhon District U.S. advisers and the two Vietnamese informants who prompted the operation. They have been separately helicoptered to the scene. The informers, garbed in baggy U.S. Army fatigues, are to remain mystery men, for their own protection. Their heads are covered with brown cloth bags with eye and mouth holes. The two present a part comic, part frightening spectacle.

The local advisers have bad news. They say the 9th Division cordon along the southern fringe of the village didn't get into place until about 9 a.m., two hours late, leaving the Vietcong an escape route. (The 9th Division later denies any delay.) Now the informers claim not to recognize the approach being taken to the village. One American sharply questions them. Another is cursing the Vietnamese "psywar" operatives trampling along with the troops: "All we need are these goddamned guys with their leaflets. And they're wearing black pajamas. Beautiful. Now the army (the 9th Division troops) will zap 'em as VC."

Looking Around

Several of the Vietnamese special police have found an empty farmhouse, recently deserted judging by damp betel-nut stains on the floor. They are passing the time knocking holes in a water barrel. In another farmhouse, the occupant, an old lady, stares at a wall while two carefree PRUs boil eggs on her wood stove.

A lone PRU wanders along the treeline shaking his head and muttering, "VC di di, VC di di . . . (VC gone, VC gone)." The troops presently advance toward a cluster of houses nearer the village center. Spaced along the mud trails at intervals of about 10 yards are thick mud bunkers, each large enough for several men. The houses also have bunkers, inside

continued

or out. Vinh Hoa, being within an [illegible]ed "free strike zone," is subject to air and artillery pounding.

No booby traps materialize. The troops arrive at a substantial farmhouse with flower beds in the front yard, a manicured hedge and pillars flanking the front entrance. It is one of many prosperous homes in Vinh Hoa—surprising, since Vietcong villages usually are poorer than government-controlled towns. Isolation from major markets, high Vietcong taxes and allied bombing are among the reasons.

Behind the house some leaf wrappings are found. "The VC must have been here," an American says. "That's what they wrap field rations in." (Leaves are used by most rural Vietnamese, VC or not, to wrap food.) The occupant of the house, an old man who stares at the interlopers through wire-rim spectacles, is shaking, through age, or fear, or both.

The aged Vietnamese is questioned briefly. "Bring him along," an American says sharply. "Let's move." Another adviser says, "That old man could be the top dog VC in this village. You never know." The old man totters along with the troops. He is released in mid-afternoon when one of the two informers claims him as an uncle.

Interrogation

At about 11 a.m., an American adviser and two special police turn up with three captives. "Found them hiding in a house," the American says. The informers inspect the captives and whisper, through an interpreter, that one is a Vietcong village guerrilla, the second a Vietcong "security section chief" and the third a non-Vietcong, perhaps a deserter from the South Vietnamese army.

The two identified as Vietcong are bound, and one of them, a narrow-shouldered, bent young man with protruding teeth, is leaned against a tree trunk. Several police interrogators and PRUs gather around him and fire questions. They want to know where Vietcong weapons and ammunition are hidden.

The suspect doesn't know or won't say. Soon the questions are interspersed with yanks at his hair and sharp kicks to his head, face and groin. The prisoner sags against the tree, face bloodied.

"Americans don't want to be here for any more of this," says one U.S. adviser, moving away. "It's a nasty goddamned business." He adds, "You know, it's a whole cycle of this stuff. Last week in another village near Don Nhon the VC marched five government sympathizers into the marketplace and beat their heads in with hammers. So we return it on this guy. It goes on and on."

By now the informers have gotten their bearings. They lead most of the troops along a trail to a hospital building behind a hedge of blue flowers. It is a straw-thatch structure containing eight wide plank beds separated by white plastic curtains. In one corner is a mud bunker, in another a crude case of glassware and medicine bottles, some with French and American labels. There are no patients or traces of them.

The Americans decide it is a Vietcong hospital for wounded enemy troops. "Burn it," an American adviser directs. Ignited with cigaret lighters, the hut burns readily.

Vinh Hoa Village

In single file, the troops wind along a trail toward the center of Vinh Hoa. Since there hasn't been any firing, the possibility of an ambush is discounted. Some of the PRUs and special police are carrying food and household articles taken from the outlying farmhouses. The "psywarriors" are strewing the trail with propaganda leaflets carried in plastic [illegible]. Some of the PRUs have ringed their helmets with garlands of flowers. The procession takes on a festive air.

Ten minutes later the column reaches the center of the village, a small cluster of houses and shops facing a square that previously contained a covered marketplace. The marketplace has been bombed out. In the center of the square is a concrete obelisk about 10 feet high—a Vietcong memorial, say the Americans, dedicated to the enemy dead. It is one target of the Phoenix strike.

The PRUs and Vietnamese special police begin searching—and sacking—the homes. They are bored, and restless, because there has been no "action." The psywarriors' plastic bags, emptied of propaganda, are commandeered for loot ranging from clothing to chickens. "Trick or treat," says an American, not really amused. In one house, some of the Vietnamese troops are having a small celebration. They have unearthed a bottle of rice wine.

A few village residents, women, children and old men, are assembled along one side of the square. They squat on their haunches in the dust. Several male captives are bound a few yards away. Against a wall, the narrow-shouldered prisoner is rocking back and forth, a trickle of blood running down his head.

Amid whirling dust, a 9th Divison helicopter lands in the square. A lean U.S. lieutenant colonel in polished boots and trim uniform steps out with aides in tow. Displaying a map marked with red grease pencil, he reports the kill totals of the support troops: "Charlie Company got three KIAs (Killed In Action), Delta Company two, we got one from my chopper. . . ." All the fatalities, he says, were armed Vietcong, carrying packs. They were shot trying to flee through the cordon. "They had low-level documents on them," the colonel reports. Presently the chopper leaves.

In the middle of the square, two Americans are strapping demolition charges around the Vietcong monument. A one-minute warning is sounded. Everyone takes cover. As the charge explodes, the monument disintegrates into chunks of brick and concrete. It is exactly noon.

The Village Church

The explosion seems to galvanize the foraging troops into action. "Don't they have anything to do but loot those houses?" an American PRU adviser shouts to a Vietnamese lieutenant. "Get the men out combing the rest of this village." Two search parties move out. A third group, mostly Americans, crosses a narrow footbridge spanning a canal to investigate a church.

Crossing the bridge, the Americans spot fresh footprints on both sides of the river connected with the canal. For the moment, they pose a mystery.

The church, a Roman Catholic structure, is bolted shut at front and rear. Just as two Americans warily advance to smash a lock, the front door opens and an elderly man in white pajamas appears, smiling as though to welcome parishioners to services. The inside of the little church is newly p[illegible] and neatly scrubbed. A row of angled [illegible] along the metal-sheet roof attests to a visit from a helicopter gunship.

In the rear are a large drum and a brass gong. An American points to them and questions the elderly church attendant.

"What are they for?"

"To call the faithful to worship."

continued

"Did you see any people leaving the village this morning?"

"No. . . ."

"We have information on how much this church pays to the VC in taxes. How much do you say it pays?"

"Maybe the people pay 100 or 200 piasters (80 cents to $1.60)."

"The church, how much does it pay?"

"The church does not pay taxes. The church never pays taxes."

"The hell it doesn't pay," the American says. "This may be a Catholic church, but it's Charlie's Catholic church."

A Taciturn Lady

The Americans follow a path past the church to a cluster of solidly built homes. Most are empty. In one, two candles burn before a postcard picture of Christ. In another, a picture of Pope Paul sits on a small altar beside a mud bunker. One house is occupied by a woman with six children. She is interrogated.

"Did you see people crossing the river this morning?"

"No, I was in my bunker."

"Where is your husband?"

"He went to the market at Cai Mang."

"Why?"

"He always goes when the soldiers come here. . . ."

"Do you know who are the VC in this village?"

"No. We don't know VC. We are Catholic. Catholics don't know VC."

"We know that a Liberation Committee was elected here. When?"

"I just heard about it recently."

"Who is the Vietcong village chief here?"

"I don't know. . . ."

"How much tax do you pay to the VC?"

"More than 1,000 piasters." (About $8.)

"How often do Vietcong song and dance (propaganda) teams come and visit?"

"Not often."

"What do they say?"

"They say the Americans will go home soon."

"How often does your husband stand guard for the VC?"

"Every five or six days."

"How often do the women here have to make punji stakes (poisoned stakes) for the VC?"

"Once or twice a year."

"That's pretty typical," says the American, heading back across the footbridge to the village square.

Disappearing Enemy

An American adviser has figured out the footprints on both sides of the river. There are no sampans around the village. Adult males except for old men, seem almost nonexistent. The village population is estimated at 2,000, but no more than 200 persons have been seen on this day.

The American finds a youngster hiding in a farmhouse. He poses a few perfunctory questions, then suddenly demands: "At what time this morning did all the people leave here by boat?" Perhaps startled by the suddenness of the query, the boy replies, "At four o'clock."

The conclusion: Most of the village's Vietcong guerrillas, VCI cadre and Liberation Committee members have eluded the Phoenix troops. "They just had to have that big meeting last night," fumes an American adviser, recalling the last planning session for the operation. "Everyone had to get in on this goddamned operation. The VC must [illegible] all about it by midnight last night. So they blew the place. Just sailed down the river on their sampans."

But there may be something to salvage from the operation. In the square, the group of squatting villagers has grown to 50 or 60. Census-Grievance operatives examine their identification cards. Few have them; in Vietcong-controlled areas, the enemy forbids the people to carry government ID cards and often punishes those who do.

The two informers, still with bags on their heads, stand behind a nearby wall, peering at the villagers. Occasionally they point to a resident and whisper to a PRU. Those put under suspicion are pulled to their feet, bound and taken aside to the prisoner group. The others remain on their haunches staring silently into the dust.

The Moving Finger

One villager "fingered" by the informers is a bowlegged woman clutching a baby. She is identified as a member of the village "women-farmer association," a Vietcong citizen-involvement organization not normally considered important enough to classify as Vietcong cadre. ("No point picking them up," a U.S. official says later in Saigon. "They're more trouble than they're worth to process and hold.")

But the woman is moved to the prisoner group, clutching the baby. Her two other children, a boy about six and a girl about 10 years old, begin to cry loudly. A PRU raises a rifle butt over their heads menacingly, and the wails subside into muffled sobs.

From behind a nearby house two shots are heard. The narrow-shouldered prisoner has been executed. His body is dumped into a bunker.

One of the psywar operatives lectures the villagers on the perils of supporting the Vietcong and outlines the benefits of backing the Saigon government. Propaganda sheets bearing a smiling portrait of President Nguyen Van Thieu are handed out.

At one side of the square an American adviser muses about the operation and what it has to do with the war: "There are 30 people sitting around a table in Paris, and they just aren't going to hack it. How can they solve this thing? The people in this village have been VC for 10 years, maybe 20. How are you going to change that? We come here on an operation, and what does it prove? We've got some crook sitting in Don Nhon picking up a salary every month because he claims to be the government village chief here. He hasn't dared to visit this village for seven years. The district chief was too chicken to come on this operation. So we come in, pick up a few Charlies and leave. The VC will be back in control here tonight. . . ."

Heading Back

At 3 p.m., with five prisoners in tow, the troops start hiking back to the landing zone in the rice paddy for transportation home. Near the paddy they meet two U.S. soldiers from the 9th Division cordon, leading two prisoners. Each of the captives wears a neatly printed "Detainee Card."

The taller and more talkative of the two informers is brought forward to examine the new prisoners. One is identified as a deputy Vietcong village chief, the other as a non-Vietcong. Both are placed with the other prisoners.

A deputy Vietcong village chief [illegible] be the most important captive [illegible] the [illegible] American adviser [illegible] "You keep this one alive, you hear. We want him alive."

Half an hour later the troops have been helicoptered back to their compound in Ben Tre and the prisoners are on their way to the Police Special Branch interrogation center. Results of the operation: Eight kills, one after torture. Seven prisoners taken for interrogation. One war memorial dynamited. One hospital burned. No friendly casualties.